

TimeSigns Episode 2

The Lost Village

This is a transcript and selected images from Channel 4's Time Signs programmes in order to ensure that the narrative is preserved. To view the full episode, please visit [4 on Demand](#).

Our starting point for our journey back into the history of the Wolf Valley was the elements on the surface, the farm buildings and their immediate environment. As the work on the reservoir proceeds, the surface features are beginning to disappear and the work of the contractors is adding to the destructive process of time itself. The time signs that once provided us with the evidence of the people who used to live in the valley in the recent past are slowly being removed and the archaeologists are scraping away the surface levels to see what lies immediately beneath. Fields that contained mounds and hollows can now be excavated. The initial research work of the archaeologists seemed to suggest that there might be more evidence of earlier occupation beneath the surface. This can now be tested by occupation and the next layer of the Wolf's history brought to life.

Archaeological objects tend to shift around in the soil. The work of the farmers, gardeners and the humble earthworm can mean that, at a relatively shallow depth below the surface, bits of the historical past can be unearthed.

'It comes to something when I can't get me own garden dug at home, here I am digging somebody else's garden in Bratton Clovelly, in this case Mr Pike's garden, vegetable garden. But the reason for this is really quite interesting, because gardens will contain a lot of objects, a lot of pottery and so on, that's been left over the years around the cottages and farms in a village like Bratton Clovelly. So that if we look in the garden soil, we can often find archaeological and historical clues to what has gone on in the village, perhaps some idea of dating and age and so on. So what I'm going to do here is dig a small part of Mr Pike's garden and see what we can turn up, see what clues we can get to the history of this particular bit of the village. A nice dark rich soil, the sort of thing you would expect in a cottage garden that's been worked for a long time.'



Possibly Anglo-Saxon Ring

'And there's our first find, a little bit of clay pipe. These things were made from the seventeenth century running through till earlier this century, were broken in huge quantities. They're almost the most common thing that we shall find. So we'll put that on one side and hopefully we might find a bit more of a pipe bowl to go with it. I'm down about six inches and it's still nice fine black soil. There was a ring found like this in Redmoor in Somerset recently and it turned out to be Anglo-Saxon and it came from just a garden surface like this. Hang on, here's a nice bit. This is part of a child's slate pencil for writing on a slate board in a school. Obviously it's broken but you can see where they've made a rounded pencil out of what was a flat piece of slate. These are quite common, they must have been lost as often as the bios today and just discarded into the garden. This is probably a slightly earlier piece. It's still not that old. It might be 16th or 17th century or immediately post-

medieval. You can see it's glazed on the inside, a rather rough ... glaze. Otherwise it's really quite rough ... made on the outside, probably a bowl or a wide dish, something like that. So that's probably the earliest thing we've got so far.'

'We're nearly at the end of this garden as question time meets archaeology. Let's just have a look at what we've got on our pile here. And it's fairly typical of what we might expect from a garden, certainly a village garden, with quite a range here of pottery, clay pipes, glass and bits of metal work. And I have no doubt if this was rained on, we might actually see even more. It would wash the surface of the soil and maybe the occasional coin, some of the less distinctive earlier pottery that's rather buff-coloured and dark browns and blacks and so on, that would also show up if the soil was washed. Alright, so that may make you look rather differently on digging the garden next time. It needn't be just an arduous chore getting the garden ready for putting plants in. You can actually perhaps learn a little bit about your own garden and your own locality from the bits and pieces that can be found.'



Pottery

As yet, no archaeological excavation has taken place in the valley. We're still at a relatively shallow level below the surface. However, as the clearance work goes ahead, some objects are beginning to appear by chance and, as is often is the case, not in any sort of historical order.

'In the valley itself are situated a number of peat deposits, and the most extensive area of peat lies in this field. And this is where we've been doing quite a lot of sampling and a lot of the environmental work. One of the basin clearance contractors who was involved in clearing the trees out of the valley and also clearing all the debris from the valley prior to it being flooded or impounded, told us that he'd found while digging a large pit, similar to the pit behind me, a shoe and he believed that it came from eight or nine feet down in the pit. Unfortunately, we weren't around when the pit was being dug. When the shoe came up in the digger bucket, he immediately stopped work because he thought there might be a body in the peat or in the alluvial deposits he was digging. But he managed to salvage the shoe out of the bucket and put it up beside the section. Unfortunately, the pit was then refilled with all the debris and wood from the area of the valley and we don't know where in the sequence of material the shoe actually came.'

'Now we hope to be able to take this back to the museum because shoe styles are very dateable and it's possible that we may be able to date this shoe very closely, within say 100 years. Perhaps it's medieval, perhaps it's 19th century, perhaps it's even older, we don't know. You can imagine crossing a ford and losing a shoe or maybe it was thrown out with some household rubbish. Maybe there was a small settlement or somebody was living very near to the river at that time. But I like to think someone was sort of crossing the river on their way somewhere and lost their shoe and it got carried downstream, lodged in the sediment. And then over the years, the sediment built up over the shoe until the shoe was completely buried. It's ironic that we've been digging holes all through the valley, either for soil pits, for looking at the soil, or as here, looking at the alluvial deposits and the peat. And somebody comes along with a JCB and digs a hole to dump rubbish in and finds a leather shoe. But that's archaeology.'

As an organic object, this shoe is a rare piece of evidence. It has been estimated that we're able to recover only 20% of artefacts from the distant past. Much of the rest, the organic remains -- wood,

leather and cloth – only too easily decay. Like many of the time signs that will be discovered in the valley, this shoe will have to undergo a process of conservation before its evidence can be fully interpreted.

‘Objects come into the conservation lab in all states of conditions. A lot of them have been buried in the soil for 2000, maybe even 3000, years. And as you can imagine, they’re in conditions bearing from poor to appalling. This object came to me looking like this, just a plastic bag full of some nasty, dark, noxious substance. The first duty of the conservator is to unwrap it, stick it in a bath of water and start cleaning it. Start removing the dirt so that we can identify the object, again bring out the details, the sewing lines, this sort of thing and make the archaeologist aware of what he’s dealing with. The water has to be removed with a solvent and then, very quickly, the solvent has to be replaced with an impregnant, a lubricant, we use lanolin. Otherwise, if we didn’t do that, the leather would deteriorate very, very quickly in a matter of hours, dry up, crack and just crumble to dust. And that would be disastrous. One of the nice things of all this is that a) the object can be handled as opposed to the nasty, wet, slimy object that came in. This is now relatively stable and people can look at it. The archaeologist can come in offsite, perhaps the person who actually dug it up, can come in and actually see what they found and handle it. And even more to the point, this object is now preserved hopefully forever. We now know a tiny fragment more about society in the Roadford Valley because we found somebody’s shoe and that’s important. We’ve encapsulated a tiny little bit of history just by filling it full of lanolin.’

[historian] ‘Over the years, it’s been possible to put together a sequence of how shoes developed. And this has really been filled out in recent years by archaeological discoveries. For example, this classic book which we’ve got down here showing all the different patterns of shoes which were excavated in medieval London and these were found in dated deposits with coins and other objects. And so the London sequence gives us a series of examples which we compare. Now if you look at the



17th Century Shoe

details of the Roadford example, I think we’re really looking at something in the late 17th century. It’s pointed and it’s got this distinctive tongue, and we could contrast it with one rather earlier in date. In fact, this is an early Tudor shoe, dated to the first half of the 16th century, and you can see by contrast, it has a big round toe. And in fact, it’s made as a turn shoe. It’s made inside out and then turned in its final stage of construction. Here we are, an example of something which is more sophisticated, quite delicate. And this is interesting because it does show that there’s a whole range of quality of footwear, different quality of footwear, in use there. And in this case, we can imagine that the farmer, or the farmer’s wife, had at least one pair of shoes that was thrown away before it was worn out. Perhaps she lost it in the mud or something. And so it’s quite a fashionable thing, not enormously trendy but really quite well made and quite stylish. And this perhaps is a little indication that the people who made this weren’t entirely savages in the 17th and 18th century.’

At the same time as archaeologists are beginning to conserve and examine the first range of objects, in the valley a more destructive process than the simple passage of time is underway. These buildings have been the homes for generations of farmers. The progress of the reservoir means they need to be removed. They have yielded their information and we can now see what lies beneath.

'It's a fairly recent idea that areas like Devon with these small farms and small hamlets themselves have deserted settlements in them. And the work in the valley here provided the opportunity of looking at this particular one, the Hennard Mill. Clearly the people who were here fifty years before their predecessors are somewhere else in the vicinity, perhaps that we haven't recognised yet.'



Last Farmstead at Hennard Mill

When the archaeologists first visited the Hennard site, all that could be seen was an isolated building surrounded by fields, some of which had an uneven surface. The house had been occupied in recent times by a family related to the Moyses at Shop Farm. It appeared as though there was just a single deserted farmstead. The documentary evidence however told an entirely different story. The 19th century census returns shows a community of nearly 50 people living at Hennard, including 21 children. The families had traditional West Country names like Northey, Pengelly and Smallacombe. As well as the farmers, there was a potter and a miller and Thomas Badcock, a master shoemaker, perhaps a descendant of the man that made the fine leather shoe found in the peat deposits. Over the next century, these people began to leave and the fields and the trees closed over the remains of their homes that had once stood beside the river.

The archaeological excavations began with the removal of the surface grass and subsoil. Digging too deep could damage the evidence and the work of the mechanical diggers had to be carefully monitored. Work by hand and trowel took over as the soil and deposits that had accumulated over 200 years was painstakingly peeled back. Months of hard work eventually produced its results as the missing village of Hennard gradually came to light. The houses that people lived in were built on natural bedrock terraces surrounding a small green called Town Place. Crossed by distinct pathways, each building had only one small downstairs room with a cobbled floor. In some of the buildings, there is a clear distinction between smooth cobbles and hearths for human habitation and rough cobbles and drains for the animals. These buildings are examples of structures that no longer exist, small cramped accommodation where people and their animals often shared the same room.

The picture that begins to emerge of Hennard in the 1850s from a wide range of sources was of a thriving hamlet dependent on the cloth industry for its existence, milling its own corn, making its own clothes and shoes. Using the detailed drawings and measurements of the houses, the archaeologists have been able to re-create a picture of what the settlements once looked like.

'These post holes show that there was a lean-to building attached to the main house.'

'Supported by posts.'

'Yes, four or five timber posts holding up ...'

'Thatched roof?'

'Yes, probably a thatched roof like the rest of the main part of the house.'



Lost Village of Hennard

But why did this community cease to exist? What exactly happened between 1850 and the present day?

'A chap called Professor Beresford wrote a book called *The Lost Villages of England* in which he said there was something like 1500 of these villages that had gone. We now know, of course, there are many more even than that. There are something like 3000 or so. We know from census records that there were more people here. The early maps, even the 19th century maps, show more cottages. But it's rather unusual in terms of most deserted villages because it's so small. Many of them are dozens of acres up in the Midlands but this is much more of a small group of farms. And again, it's provided an opportunity of looking at a site that's small like that. There are very rarely any obvious events that extinguishes a place. A reservoir's quite a good modern example of that. The Black Death was another example, although we've tended to over-emphasise that in the past. Much more common is just slow economic and social change. A place just winds down, people drift away, get jobs elsewhere, go and live somewhere else and the place just gradually collapses. It's left with the old people in it and then eventually they die and the place is completely empty. And this, I suspect, went through that sort of story. Nothing dramatic.'



Artist's Depiction of Hennard

Some traces of the those who once lived in here can be found in the graveyards of the surrounding churches. The descendants of the Northey family were laid to rest at Germansweek. Church are, in themselves, complex collections of time signs which span many historical periods. Like the landscape and buildings, they can be read like a historical document. They represent the traditions of a social structure that was central to the life of the farming community.



Church at Bratton Clovelly

[*Bratton Clovelly Church*] 'Now here we are inside the church. And when we go into any English medieval parish church, the questions we want to ask ourselves are 'What is there in this building and in its furnishings and fittings that will tell us about the history of the people who have lived and used it over the course of the centuries?' Now this is a particularly fine example of a Norman font from the 12th century. It's made of Cornish granite coming from near Tintagel and is carved into this remarkable shape. Very difficult stuff to carve, of course, very hard material. And it did impact the

sermon in stone in itself. Because the Normans had this firm belief that there was everywhere in the world the forces of good and evil fighting over the human soul. And you can see that happening right here on the font. See these dragons, the great worms of the world, the great symbols of evil fighting over this beautiful flower-like pattern. And here, around the corners of the font, are these hideous grotesque creatures who are lying in wait for the human soul. And the way to avoid the powers of evil, and the grotesque and the monsters and the demons that everywhere lurk waiting for the human soul is through the sacraments of the church. And the first of the sacraments was baptism, administered in the font.'



Norman Font



Close-up of Font

'And the other great feature of this church are the wall paintings because here you really have got something that brings us very, very close indeed to the religious history of the whole community. Because quite obviously there was here a whole series of wall paintings covering the whole of the interior of the church. During the Reformation period in the 16th century, it was regarded as wrong to depict the saints, to have depictions of our Lord, either in stained glass or in wall paintings and therefore they were covered with whitewash. But then in the 17th century, it seemed rather stark and bare in churches to have such vast expanses of whitewash. And so the whitewash was, in turned, covered by the Old Testament prophets. And on the southern side of the church, matching



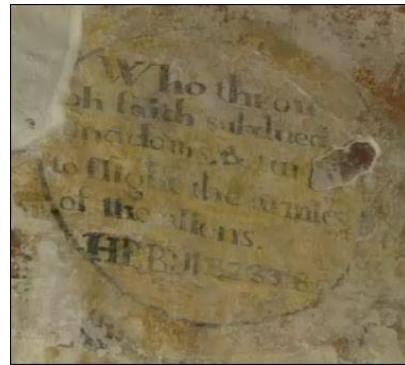
Wall Paintings

them, we have the New Testament apostles. And so you've got this build up of layers. You have got the medieval wall paintings, covering them is the 16th century whitewash, covering the 16th century whitewash are the 17th century texts and scrolls, and then in our own day all of this has been laboriously picked off to reveal something of the history of the building and the medieval paintings that lurk underneath. It's a great problem for restorers, of course, what to restore. Whether to restore the 17th century paintings or to restore the medieval ones that lie underneath them.'

'In any English parish church, by asking the right questions and by observing carefully what survives from the past, we can get some indication of the life of the community, the life of the people and their opinions and their ideas over the course of the centuries.'



Close-up of Paintings



17th Century Puritan Text

As the people of the present attend their services at Bratton and the other churches in the valley, they are surrounded by signs of the past. Stepping over an early Christian memorial stone, they'll pass the Norman font and its silent sermon stone. They can glance up at the late medieval wall paintings and read the 17th century Puritan texts. The 19th century windows record the farming year and the fertility of the land. The font carries the product of a farming tradition that has now ceased to exist at Wortha, Shop and Hennard. But the archaeological evidence remains and this has started to form its own collection of time signs and begun to create a picture of the past.

We have now completed this next stage of our journey back in time and the surface features have, in many cases, been removed. During a recent stage of the Hennard excavation, pottery was discovered below the 18th century levels. If this proved to be medieval, this would point the way to the next layer of history. But time is beginning to run out. A date for impounding the reservoir has been set.



Farming Tradition in the Church